

## FOREWORD

In 1997 a Labour government was elected in Britain. In 1996, while in opposition, it had set up a Literacy Task Force, which published a report in the summer of 1997, setting out a National Literacy Strategy. This strategy is aimed at meeting the government's target that by 2002 80% of 11-year-olds should reach Level 4 or above in the English tests which are taken by all primary school pupils at the end of Key Stage 2. The implementation of the National Literacy Strategy was supported by extensive public funding for both resources and training: over £50 million in 1998-99, with further funding promised for future years. Materials were published which identify teaching objectives for pupils throughout the primary school age range, from the 4- to 5-year-olds at the beginning of Key Stage 1, to the 10- to 11-year olds at the top of Key stage 2. These materials, distributed to all primary teachers in the country, include a ring-binder which is the 'framework for teaching', and a pack of materials used on courses attended by representatives from all primary schools during the first year of the strategy. The teaching strategy identifies a 'literacy hour' which it prescribes for the whole primary school each day as the means of teaching the specified objectives. As is explained in Beard (n.d. p.5), 'the Strategy recommends that every primary school should adopt the Framework unless it can demonstrate through its action plan, schemes of work and test performance that its own approach is at least as effective.'

The purpose of this paper is to explore in some detail one specific aspect of the National Literacy Strategy, namely the theories about language which the strategy incorporates. There have been discussions about the strategy among members of the British Association for Applied Linguistics, the Linguistics Association of Great Britain and the Committee for Linguistics in Education, although I should stress that this paper represents a personal view. Shortly before this paper went to press, I was informed that, apparently as a direct result of representation from a number of linguists, the 'Glossary of Terms used in the Framework' is to be rewritten. This is welcome news, but in my opinion amendments to the glossary can address only some of the problems which arise from the way language is represented in the National Literacy Strategy.

Alison Sealey



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University of Warwick  
Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK

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# THEORIES ABOUT LANGUAGE IN THE NATIONAL LITERACY STRATEGY

## INTRODUCTION

The National Literacy Strategy is a high profile initiative which has generated much debate about policy and practice, and it is the blueprint for far reaching reforms 'on the ground' every day in primary school classrooms across England. As such, the strategy is of considerable interest to researchers, practitioners and politicians concerned with the pedagogy of literacy and the schooling experience of young children. In this paper I focus quite specifically on one aspect of the National Literacy Strategy (hereinafter 'NLS'), namely the *theories about language* which underpin it, and I use as principal data the texts which define it. I identify these as the ring-binder entitled 'The National Literacy Strategy', subtitled 'Framework for Teaching' (DfEE 1998a) and the associated package of training materials, including overhead transparencies, scripts for trainers, video-tapes - mainly of classroom practice - and audio-cassettes explaining aspects of the thinking behind the strategy (e.g. DfEE 1998b).

One of the first observations to be made about the ring-binder 'at text level', as the NLS would have it, is that, unlike the 'information texts' whose covers and title pages pupils are directed to scrutinise for details of their provenance (e.g. DfEE 1998a, p.23) there is no indication on this document of its authorship. The front cover features the logos and names of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit (at the top), and the DfEE (at the bottom), and there is a foreword by Education Secretary David Blunkett. Some of the booklets in the training package include attributions and acknowledgements, but the guide for this 'Literacy Training Pack' states: 'The NLS Framework should be the basis of the school's literacy curriculum' (p. 1), suggesting that it is this ring-binder which is definitive of the strategy, and that it intends a very comprehensive reach.

Following the introduction of the NLS have come published materials for use in classrooms, and articles about the strategy ranging from descriptive accounts of classroom practice (e.g. Moriarty 1999) to more analytical texts about the theories of literacy teaching implicated in this latest development (e.g. Graham 1998), from which it is clear that the NLS is being received and interpreted in various ways. I should make it clear that I am not seeking to evaluate the strategy as a whole. Therefore I will not elaborate on details of the context for the introduction of the NLS, although it is important to note that there has been quite fierce controversy



surrounding the numerous policy developments in the teaching of English in England in the last decade, and that a new strategy such as this one is inevitably implemented in the context of that controversy. A previous national strategy for increasing teachers' knowledge about language, the LINC (Language in the National Curriculum) project, was found to be so controversial that the materials it produced were banned by the government (LINC n.d.). There has, then, been a protracted tussle over a 'model' of language to underpin the English curriculum in schools in the last decade and elements of it can be identified in the Kingman and Cox Reports (DES 1988; DES and the Welsh Office 1988), and successive versions of the National Curriculum, as well as the LINC materials and the fallout from these (see Carter 1996; Sealey 1994a). Since this paper focuses on theories of language, I shall in places use the LINC materials as a point of comparison with the NLS documents.

The NLS Framework proclaims itself a 'strategic' document, specifying objectives, techniques and methods of classroom management. In doing so, it appears to side-step explicit engagement with theories about language. The paper which was published after the NLS had been introduced (Beard n.d.), to provide details of the research on which it was based, makes scant reference to any theory of language, and the LINC project, a national initiative which involved thousands of teachers in investigations of the teaching of knowledge about language, is not mentioned at all. However, in so far as 'literacy' in this context means literacy in the English language - an assumption which should perhaps be challenged - the NLS inevitably draws on some theory of language (or at any rate the English language) and cannot escape involvement in what are fundamentally theoretical questions. It is nearly a quarter of a century since Margaret Meek (then Spencer) wrote: 'More and more we are convinced that it is difficult to separate what we need to know about reading from what we know about language and the motivated use of it' (Spencer and McKenzie 1975 p.13).

At various places in the materials, there are statements about language, texts and literacy which would seem implicitly consistent with ideas which proved controversial when made explicit in the LINC materials. However, in the Framework itself, and at other places in the training materials, the model of language assumed is much closer to the traditional one sought by the ministers who commissioned - and then banned - those same materials. This internal inconsistency and lack of explicitness in the NLS may be a shrewd political decision, or it may prove to be to the detriment of the strategy overall.

Before moving on to the main topic of this paper, I should state that, like many of my colleagues, I find much in the NLS with which I can agree. I particularly welcome, for example, its recognition that reading involves a

range of strategies, the prominence it gives to using a wide variety and range of texts in teaching (as had already been specified in the National Curriculum) and its emphasis on both pupil involvement and explicit teaching, which is specifically differentiated from 'some crude or simple form of "transmission" teaching' (DfEE 1998a, p.8). My own research and experience (e.g. Sealey 1992; Sealey 1994b; Sealey 1996) support the belief that children are capable of engagement with quite sophisticated ideas about language itself, and it is gratifying to see primary school pupils demonstrating such abilities in some of the video sequences, for example. My own observations, together with experiences reported by others, suggest that the NLS is capable of being interpreted positively and to good effect, with impressive work expected of, and achieved by, heterogeneous school communities. I would hope and wish that these interpretations are the ones which prevail. However, the contribution which this paper seeks to make is in an area which I believe stands in need of extensive further attention: the explicit and implied conceptualisations of language in the NLS.

## THEORY FOR PRACTICE

The authors of the LINC materials were explicit about how they saw the relationship between people and texts, and between the different parts of a text and the whole. They expressed a commitment to a Hallidayan, functional model of language:

- The making of meaning is the reason for the invention, existence and development of language.
- All meanings exist within the context of culture. Cultural values and beliefs determine the purposes, audience, settings and topics of language.
- Texts, spoken and written, are created and interpreted by making appropriate choices from the language system according to specific purposes, audiences, settings and topics.

LINC (n.d.) p.2

This was also represented diagrammatically to illustrate the interpenetration of texts and human meanings with the social world. A diagram in the NLS (DfEE 1998a, p.4) also places the text at the centre, but narrows the focus considerably to highlight the components of the strategy, which are identified as sounds, words and sentences. The Framework is divided into two kinds of sections, to facilitate its usefulness as a planning document for classroom work. One axis is that of time, so that objectives are presented in a linear list, term by term, as pupils move through the year groups in the



primary school. The other axis divides literacy 'work' into three 'levels': 'Word level work', subheaded 'phonics, spelling and vocabulary'; 'Sentence level work', subheaded 'grammar and punctuation'; and 'Text level work', subheaded 'comprehension and composition'. Although the Framework includes several categorical statements about the inter-relationship between these 'levels', and statements at various points that word and sentence level work should be derived from interactions with texts, the visual separation of language into these three strands, and the atomising effect of long lists of numbered and bulleted points, inevitably carry a particular semiotic message which is at odds with a notion of the integrity and coherence of textual meanings.

So what are the underpinning theories about language in the NLS? I have suggested that there are some internal inconsistencies in this area, and to illustrate this I shall discuss some examples from the 'training modules' and some others from the Framework, again drawing comparisons with approaches to be found in the LINC materials.

#### THEORIES ABOUT SPEECH AND WRITING

It is often observed that a crucial difference between the spoken and written modes of a language is that the former is learned by nearly all human beings without formal, institutionalised instruction, while it is literacy which has to be taught and from which certain groups are - or can be - excluded. Thus it is no surprise that the National Literacy Strategy should emphasise features of the (English) language in its written mode. There is the potential, though, for this emphasis to result in some distortion, and this has not altogether been avoided in the NLS. The entry in the LINC glossary for 'phonology' is fairly brief (LINC n.d., p.349), but it makes a number of important points. One of these contextualises 'those patterns and contrasts of sound specific to any one language' within 'the much wider range of sounds that a human voice can actually produce'. The entry also alludes to the accents associated with different dialects and different languages. Phonology is needed to identify the contrastive units of sound which are salient in any given language, since in actual speech:

... there are many transitional effects as one sound merges into the next, and we find that many sounds are modified in systematic ways according to what other sounds surround them. This means that there is considerable variation in the articulation of what might have appeared as instances of the same sound - far more so than is apparent when we study sounds in isolation.

Graddol et al (1994) p.42

If speech and writing are represented as merely variants of one another, there is the danger of conflating the two and doing justice to neither. As Carney explains:

In looking at spelling we need to keep sounds and letters quite separate. So [in his article] letters are cited in angled brackets and symbols for speech sounds are put between slant lines. The letters < said > spell /sed/ and < text > spells /tekst/.

Carney (1998) p.32

Carney's article demonstrates how, even without the complexities of a standard phonetic alphabet, it is possible to maintain visually the distinction between phonemes and letters. Any teaching of phonological awareness as part of literacy needs to recognise that the writing system is not a direct, unmediated record of speech. However, the NLS uses only standard orthography and notation to refer to both systems, and, confusingly, it prescribes teaching to 'identify phonemes in speech and writing' (DfEE 1998a, p.24, emphasis added). Carney continues, 'People often foul things up when talking about spelling because they do not differentiate between letters and sounds' (*ibid*). Unfortunately, from the early teaching of 'word level work' in the NLS, one could almost infer that the sounds of English are useful only in so far as they can be 'heard' to correspond with the alphabetic system of letters. The linguist Ronald Wardaugh comments usefully on the 'feeling' many people have:

that we derive our pronunciations of words from their spellings. ... Consequently, we find people saying that *debt* has a silent *b*, we are exhorted not to "drop" the final *g* in a word like *going*, and children are taught that some letters "say their own names." To anyone with a good understanding of the nature of language, such statements are bizarre.

Wardaugh (1999) p.16

One problem with the conflation of speech and writing is that learners are likely to look for sound cues in writing where they are not to be found. The contemporary (and geographically varied) pronunciation of many English words, of course, does not correspond neatly with their spelling, and the letters needed to spell them 'correctly' are not there because they 'represent phonemes'. They are rather, as Carney (1998 p.35) puts it, 'the debris of history'. A 'correct' spelling simply refers to the written representation of a word which has been fixed, often arbitrarily, at the moment in history when it was included in the dictionary, and some of its letters may be there for



historical reasons. The *b* in *debt*, for example, derives from the 16th century fashion for making spelling reflect Latin or Greek etymology (Crystal 1987) (a socially motivated fashion, of course); in cases like these, there just is no simple 'phonic' justification for the presence of certain letters in the written version of the word.

Phonology, in linguistics, is about more than individual sounds and words. The LINC glossary entry reminds its readers that the intonation patterns of speech are an important aspect of phonology, again emphasising interactional meanings rather than discrete sounds, as is also the case in the sound patterns of poetry. (The sounds in poetry do feature in the NLS, but at 'text level', the level furthest from 'phonological awareness', which again highlights the potential problems of this 'levels' approach to language description.) If the two modes are conflated, those features of speech which distinguish it in form and structure from writing are likely to be ignored or represented as deficiencies. Language users utilise the resources of both modes economically, though differently, and yet in the NLS glossary entry for 'ellipsis', we are told:

Writers and speakers may use ellipsis for purposes of economy or style. For instance in the exchange: "Where are you going?" "To town", the second speaker has missed out "I am going". She/he assumes that the reader will understand the omission; this saves boring repetition.

DfEE 1998a, p.79

The conflation of the two modes is quite apparent here. The exchange is represented as speech; it refers to 'the second speaker'. Yet the 'audience' for the remark is 'the reader', so we must infer that we are considering speech written down, which presents quite different challenges for readers and writers from actual speech for participants who are 'in one another's response presence' (Goffman 1983 p.93). Arguably, the notion of an 'omission' here is quite misplaced: when speakers share a context for their talk, they do not set about modifying a written script, judiciously missing out details so as to 'save boring repetition'. On the contrary, it is writers who have to be aware of the need to convey *additional* information which is not provided in the context shared by interlocutors. Moreover, speakers tolerate a high proportion of redundancy in talk in real time. (Never mind the ellipsis, listen to the repetition!). Writing, on the other hand, partly through its much greater lexical density, actually represents experience in different ways (Halliday 1989). Teachers of language and literacy need to be aware that speech and writing 'are both forms of a language; it is the same linguistic system underlying both. But they exploit different features of the

system, and gain their power in different ways' (*ibid* p.100, emphasis added).

## THEORIES ABOUT GRAMMAR

The LINC materials were able to apply a consistent linguistic theory to developing teachers' and pupils' knowledge about language. The functional model deployed gave pre-eminence to communicative purposes, and to the texts which realised these. Grammar was represented as one of three 'levels of analysis' of a text:

1. **Organisation** of the text, including the way in which the parts are related to each other and to the whole.
2. **Grammar**, in which there are two points of focus. First, there is the structuring of sentences, clauses and phrases. Secondly, there are the choices that govern the way information is handled and meanings conveyed. These choices are most apparent in the selection of verbs and in the types of noun phrases employed.
3. **Vocabulary**, in which the function of words and groups of words in contributing to textual meaning are considered, not just the nature of isolated words.

LINC (n.d.) p.315

The NLS project was established to 'raise standards' of literacy, and theories of language, as I have suggested, are more obliquely represented. I think this sets up a tension in the approach. To some extent, the materials respond to a pressure towards integration, including prescriptions about teaching about language in context and about basing such teaching around texts. Thus there are echoes of the LINC perspective in some of the training materials. It is not easy, for example, to identify which of these statements come from which document:

1. Grammar and punctuation are remembered most easily when they are taught and practised actively within the context of reading and writing, especially when there is a genuine need to use them purposefully.
2. A systematic study of word classes quite naturally, and inevitably, involves considering the functions of such abstraction in particular texts.
3. Knowledge of written grammar is rooted in the explicit investigation of texts through reading and writing.



4. Grammar is not just sorting words into different classes, but about the connections between word and sentence structure in relation to audience, purpose and text types.

Readers might be surprised to learn that only (2) comes from LINC (p.330), the others occurring in Module 3 of the NLS (DfEE 1998b, Teacher's Notes p.46). There is a clear statement in the LINC materials about the integration of grammar and vocabulary with text: 'the concept of grammar is not viewed in a narrow and sentence-bound way, but is also seen as operating across clauses and sentences' (LINC n.d., p.329). Despite one definition of grammar in the NLS which is quite close to that provided by the LINC materials (DfEE 1998b, Teacher's Notes p.8), the termly objectives consistently present grammar as 'sentence level work'. The training materials also include this overhead transparency (OHT), which purports to offer an answer to the question 'What is grammar'? Under this heading are just four points:

- Some words change their spelling depending on their function in a sentence, e.g.
  - run
  - runs
  - running
  - ran.
- Words can have different functions within sentences depending on their place in the sentence and their relationship to other words, e.g.
  - 'You must watch my watch.'
- Different types of writing use different sentence structures, e.g.
  - My love is like a red, red rose. (Poetry)
  - Plant roses in the Spring. (Instruction)
- Different types of text use different lay-outs, organisation, sentence structures and language features.

DfEE 1998b, OHT 3.1

This reads as a very arbitrary list of points. It is hard to see why the different forms of 'run' are explained in terms of spelling rather than morphology; speakers, including very young children, use the different forms of 'run' with no thought at all for their spelling (see the discussion of speech and writing above). Indeed, the novice speaker may produce 'runned' and even 'ranned', demonstrating an implicit awareness of morphology, or grammar, but no such awareness of spelling at all! Contrary to the professed text-based approach, the sentence provided to illustrate the different uses of 'watch'

seems contrived to make a point, rather than drawn from any actual text. The explanation of links between 'types of writing' and sentence structure is confused: many a poetic line is also an imperative ('Do not go gentle into that good night'). So all this appears somewhat at odds with what has gone before. I would suggest that one of the problems with this version of 'grammar' is the very inexplicitness about how 'grammar' is to be understood. Given the inevitable controversies associated with defining grammar in education (see, for example, Cameron 1997; Cameron and Bourne 1988; Carter 1996; Goddard 1991), the NLS seems to have avoided adopting an explicit position, but in doing so it may well make confusions and tensions more likely.

There are a number of other idiosyncrasies in the way concepts are presented, which also seem to derive from this unresolved tension between an integrated, text-based approach to language and a separation of teaching about language into words and sentences. Of course, attention to words and to grammar need not be incompatible with attention to texts, but practitioners need a clear and explicit rationale to underpin teaching about the links between them.

Both clauses and phrases are important in grammatical descriptions; indeed they are arguably more salient than 'words' and 'sentences', but the NLS seems uncertain about the status of the phrase. Hudson (1992 p.236) explains clearly why, for the purposes of identifying elements of the clause such as the subject or object, it is logical to identify as 'phrases' even single words: the number of words in the phrase functioning as, say, the subject, can be one (e.g. *children*) or several (e.g. *the five-year-old children*). The NLS, however, defines a phrase as 'two or more words which act as one unit'. There is further confusion about the relationship between 'words' and 'phrases' when word classes are defined. 'Adjectives' and 'adverbs', which are considered by most linguists as categories for individual words, are each defined as 'a word or phrase which ...', whereas a noun is 'a word that ...', and a verb is 'word/group of words which ...'. Much careful work has been undertaken by linguists to illuminate the precise relationships between the components of the language system; adherents of different approaches may differ in their designation of an example as 'group' or 'phrase', but I am convinced that explanations in the NLS such as those quoted will cause difficulties for both pupils and teachers if they try to apply a coherent system of analysis to authentic examples of language in texts.

## THEORIES ABOUT WORDS

If teaching is to focus on words, classroom activities identified as 'word level work' could involve considerations of words in terms of form, or function,



or meaning - or all of these. Certainly the formal dimension of spelling receives extensive attention in the NLS. Yet an item prescribing that 'pupils should be taught ... to use 3rd and 4th place letters to locate and sequence words in alphabetical order' appears under the sub-heading of 'Vocabulary extension' (DfEE 1998a, p.39). This would seem to highlight the interpretation of 'vocabulary' as formally organised banks of words, rather than relationally connected items of meaning. In the next column, item 3 of 'Grammatical awareness', a sub-section of 'Sentence level work', specifies that 'pupils should be taught ... [to] identify the use of powerful verbs, e.g. "hobbled" instead of "went"'. Although we can infer that the writers probably have in mind the laudable aim of extending children's vocabulary to include more non-core items, it is unclear why this item should be presented as 'grammatical awareness'. Furthermore, it would again seem to be the separation of language into discrete 'levels' which accommodates the idea that verbs can be inherently 'powerful', irrespective of context.

In the classroom, the separation of 'word level work' from textual context and communicative purpose can have unfortunate consequences. When pupils are asked to improve their writing by finding a 'better' or a 'more interesting' word (DfEE 1998a, p.41), they often do not understand what is being asked of them, and may try simply opting for words with more syllables. Obviously, this will sometimes be appropriate and sometimes not. A sequence on one of the training videos shows a teacher asking his class to supply 'premiership words' to describe how a character would have felt, contrasting these with 'words we use all the time'. The concepts of 'registers' and 'semantic fields' might have helped both teachers and pupils here. The NLS embodies high expectations of pupils' ability to handle concepts and terms such as 'antonyms' and 'auxiliary verbs'; 'registers' and 'semantic fields' need not be inherently more challenging, but it is an intrinsic property of these concepts that they do not fit neatly into any one of the 'levels'. Pupils need opportunities to recognise the relationships between different aspects of texts, and to appreciate that meaning is emergent from those relationships and is not reducible to their constituent parts.

## THEORIES ABOUT ENGLISH AND VARIETIES OF ENGLISH

An issue which always seems to prove controversial is 'standard English', and the definition given in the NLS assumes that it is one variety, 'the language of public communication', contrasting it with 'dialect, or archaic forms or those pertaining to other forms of English, such as American/Australian English', whereas most linguists acknowledge the

different standard Englishes evolving in different parts of the world (see, for example, Crystal 1994; Graddol 1996; McArthur 1998; Wilkinson 1995).

I recently observed a literacy hour lesson, based on material commercially published to support the NLS, which sought to address the 'sentence level' objective for Year 2 Term 2 item 5, teaching pupils to 'use verb tenses with increasing accuracy in speaking and writing'. These six-year-olds had no difficulty in identifying past tenses in class discussion, but were confounded during the 'independent work' by a worksheet which required them to 'correct' 'mistakes' in the past tense verbs in a set of decontextualised sentences. The problem they had with 'I done my homework last night' was not any uncertainty about 'verb tense', but the fact that their variety of English allows for this construction as a past tense. The knowledge about language which was unfamiliar was knowledge about variations in English among regional and class dialects, and the teacher was hard pressed to enlighten the children via a focus on verb tenses.

An inaccurate depiction of the English verb tense system also contributes to the overall anglocentricity of the view of language implicit in the NLS. In several places it seems to acknowledge what McCarthy and Carter (1994) refer to as 'the contrastive principle', which states '... that awareness of the operation of language in all texts is usually best stimulated when texts are compared and contrasted' (p.166). So pupils are to be taught, in 'text level work', to 'compare books by different authors on similar themes' (DfEE 1998a, p.30), and to 'compare and contrast poems on similar themes' (DfEE 1998a, p.38). Yet at the level of the linguistic system, the potential for contrast and comparison with languages other than English is not realised.

For example, different languages have different systems for indicating 'tense'. If the influences of other languages are to come into the description of English used by teachers and pupils, it would surely be preferable to explore the patterns explicitly in several language systems by recognising that the English system is not the only one. Many primary school pupils are already bilingual, with the linguistic resources to make comparisons across languages, while for monolinguals, it is often when they begin to learn a foreign language that aspects of grammar become more 'visible' and available for conscious consideration. On the other hand, if English is to be the only language discussed, it is, as Hudson (1992 p.256) explains, 'quite misleading to force English tenses into the mould of languages like Latin or French, where a much larger number of tenses are distinguished by inflectional morphology'. English has only two simple tenses: present and past are the only locations in time in English which can be indicated by the morphology of the verb (e.g. *wants, wanted*), while other temporal distinctions are denoted by combining several words (e.g. *is going to want*,



had wanted). Reference to future time in English makes use of the construction *going to*, as well as modal verbs such as *will* and *may*. It can also be denoted by a present tense construction, often with a temporal marker: 'The play opens in the West End later this month'; 'I'm leaving at the end of next week'. Yet the NLS glossary credits English with the three tenses of 'past', 'present' and 'future'; it includes 'continuous' as a fourth category in the same entry, and it depicts modal verbs simply as 'auxiliaries', with no entry for 'modality'. A similar theory about verb tenses in English seems to underpin the teaching objectives (e.g. Year 4 Term 1 Item 2 of 'Sentence level work').

### THEORIES ABOUT LANGUAGE REPRESENTED IN THE GLOSSARY OF TERMS

This brings me to another section of the materials which deals explicitly with the linguistic dimension of the NLS. In the absence of a clear linguistic theory to underpin the strategy, nuggets are to be found in various sections of the training modules, and particularly on the audio-cassettes. However, for definitions about language, and as a source of reference, readers are likely to consult the NLS's glossary of terms. It is illuminating to observe some of the contrasts between this and the LINC glossary.

The latter includes a fairly lengthy introduction which offers a statement of its rationale: 'In compiling this glossary, ... different perspectives have been allowed for, but ultimately an insistence is made on technical descriptions as free from prejudice as possible.' It thus eschews the kind of entries which do crop up in the NLS glossary, such as that for 'double negative', which reads:

the use of two negative forms which effectively cancel each other out, as in: *I never took nothing*. Often used by children for emphasis. It is acceptable to use a negative form with a word which has a negative prefix: *he was not unattractive*. The effect of a sentence like this may be compared with: *he was attractive*.

DfEE 1998a, p.78

This contains the old notion that the meaning of a double negative is to be deduced from mathematical logic, which has been repeatedly refuted in linguistics (for a summary of the arguments, see Cheshire 1998). It maintains that double negatives are a feature of children's language, but fails to specify whether this refers to speech or writing, or to provide any evidence for the claim. Finally, by ruling on the kind of double negative which is 'acceptable', the authors of the NLS glossary are engaged in *prescribing*

rather than *defining*. If the point being made is that written standard English no longer allows double negation, then it is this which needs to be made explicit.

The LINC glossary also acknowledges the more comprehensive works of reference on which it has drawn. It recognises that there are difficulties in linguistic classification, and is explicit about alternative approaches which give rise to different decisions, pointing out under the entry for 'parts of speech', for example, that '... linguists now regard these traditional groupings as problematic and ill-defined' (LINC n.d., p.348). No such information or hint of complexity is provided by the NLS glossary, but some of the entries reveal assumptions about language and its description which linguists are certain to find questionable. For example, a comparison of the respective entries of LINC and the NLS for 'noun' reveals that, while LINC recognises the traditional classification of nouns 'as words that refer to people, places, things and ideas' (LINC n.d., p.347), it goes on to explain how contemporary linguistics uses morphology and syntax in classification. In other words, nouns are typically words which can be marked for number and modified by the 'possessive s' (*dogs, dog's*); they occur in noun phrases as the subjects and objects of verbs and in prepositional phrases ('going to the dogs'). In my experience, when pupils and students are introduced to these ideas as 'tests' for nouns, they find them useful, a way of making such classification more transparent and less difficult. For the NLS, however, a noun is, categorically, 'a word that names a thing or a feeling' (DfEE 1998a, p.83).

The pattern of defining word classes exclusively with reference to meaning, rather than in terms of form or distribution - except for the occasional 'tip' such as 'many adjectives can be transformed into adverbs by addition of -ly' - is consistent throughout the glossary. An objective for Year 4 Term 3 includes the idea that word endings can be 'important clues for identifying word classes', but notional definitions are the most frequently used in the training materials, and there are sequences on the videos where teachers ask pupils to identify the verb in a sentence by asking them 'What's the "doing word"?'. This reminds me of one of the first lessons I observed at the beginning of my own teacher training. The teacher put this question to her class in relation to the sentence 'The boy rode his bicycle'. For one young respondent, the 'doing word' was 'the pedals! Humorous though such examples may be, they demonstrate a very common conflation of two ways of thinking about language. Appreciation of its structures and configurations may require learners to focus, temporarily, on its recurrent patterns rather than hoping to derive knowledge about form from meaning alone: it is not only verbs which denote 'what is done', and verbs can denote things other than observable 'deeds'. Accurate classifications depend



on the potential of words to *interact* with other parts of the linguistic system much more than on their inherent 'meaning' as a 'naming', 'doing' or 'describing' word.

The glossary definition for 'adjective' likewise is a semantic one, which lists 'different sorts of adjective', starting with 'number'. Thus one of the first examples of adjectives listed is the word *hundreds*, hardly a prototypical example to help teachers using this glossary to brush up their confidence in grammatical terminology. Hurford supplies the following 'rough tests for being an adjective in English':

- You can put an adjective in place of the X in the X thing or some X stuff.
- You can put an adjective in place of the X in *The thing was X* or *The stuff was X*.
- You can **modify** many, but not all, adjectives with the word *very*. Hurford (1994) p.8

The reader may wish to try these 'rough tests' on the word *hundreds*, or to find in any authentic text a context in which an adjective is used where *hundreds* could be substituted. *Hundreds* also fails to conform to the pattern of adjectives in English in that it is inflected with the plural morpheme *-s*. Of the other categories of 'adjective' listed, most are not classified as adjectives in contemporary linguistics, and similar criticisms could be levelled at several other definitions of word classes.

The central focuses of the LINC project and of the NLS were not identical, LINC having been charged with developing teachers' knowledge about language, rather than methods of teaching literacy - although both were aimed at largely the same audience. Thus one would expect a greater proportion of terms relating to the study of language itself in the LINC glossary, and terms relating to literature in the NLS glossary, and this is indeed the case. However, the absence of overlap between terms which feature as main entries in the two glossaries is not entirely explained by this difference in focus. The list overpage is not comprehensive, since it deliberately highlights contrasts in perspective, but it does illustrate some assumptions about priorities in the area of knowledge about language.

Without wishing to quibble over insignificant matters of detail, I have tried through these examples to identify how the competing theories about language implicit in the NLS are likely to cause difficulties for pupils, teachers and student teachers. I have argued elsewhere (Sealey 1997), along with others (e.g. Dixon and Stratta 1988), that any model of language is unlikely to prove comprehensive and definitive, or robust enough to support changing educational policy priorities, but models derived from linguistic

research are likely to have a theoretical coherence which is defensible and testable against empirical evidence. Through LINC, these insights might have influenced school-level teaching about language; through the NLS, they seem much less likely to do so.

	LINC	NLS
active (active verbs; active voice)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
agreement		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
ambiguity		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
cinquain		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
clerihew		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
coherence	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
cohesion	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
collocation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
discourse	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
double negative		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
epitaph		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
eulogy		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
intertextuality	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
kenning		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
modality	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
morpheme	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
morphology	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
noun	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
nominalisation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
opinion		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
register	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
trigraph		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

## THEORIES ABOUT DISCOURSE AND PEDAGOGY

The NLS gives prominence to actual texts, and to a wide variety of texts produced for purposes other than teaching. In this, as was also the case in the LINC project, the NLS seems to adopt the approach advocated by McCarthy and Carter, of recognising 'language as discourse'. This, they claim, 'enables [teachers] to be more faithful to what language is and what people use it for' (McCarthy and Carter 1994, p.201, original emphasis). My reservation about the NLS is that some of its underlying conceptions of language are not consistent with an evidence-based description of language, and that there is a latent prescriptivism which will inevitably clash with the



language data which pupils will uncover in texts. As Wardaugh has observed (1999 p.129), 'In every other serious discipline the practitioners respect their data. Only in language study do many of those who seek to influence others turn their backs on data in favor of opinion'.

One source of massive quantities of authentic language data from which descriptions of the language system can be derived is linguistic corpora. Analysis of this data is leading to refinements in theories of language which illuminate the inter-connections between lexis and syntax, and between the social and rhetorical purposes of language users and the characteristics of different genres of text. In particular, corpus analysis undermines very persuasively a 'building-blocks' model of text generation, in which speakers - or writers - pick single words to add to more single words and thus create sentences, and, eventually, texts.

As teachers, we need to understand more about how it is that language users, including pupils as 'apprentice' writers, are able to produce, from existing linguistic resources, texts which are new and original and yet which conform to the predictable patterns of existing genres. Crucial to this process would seem to be what Sinclair calls 'the idiom principle': Firstly:

[t]here are sets of linguistic choices which come under the heading of register, and which can be seen as large-scale conditioning choices. Once a register choice is made, and these are normally social choices, then all the slot-by-slot choices are massively reduced in scope or even, in some cases, pre-empted.

Sinclair (1991) p.110

This means in the first place that teaching must surely introduce many aspects of language work as 'top-down', because the macro structure has such a conditioning influence on micro, word-level choices. It also has implications for teachers' - and pupils' - understanding of objectives such as those for Year 3 Term 1 Items 16 - 18:

16 to understand the purpose and organisation of the thesaurus, and to make use of it to find synonyms;

17 to generate synonyms for high frequency words, e.g. *big, little, like, good, nice, nasty*;

18 to use the term 'synonym'.

DfEE 1998a, p.33

For these investigations to be successful, words need to be presented not in isolation, but in context: not only the context of authentic texts, which are characterised by registers, but also in the more local context of the

surrounding words. As the definition of 'synonym' in Carter and Nash (1990 p.262) explains: 'The words "fat", "plump", "stout" and "obese" are synonyms, appropriate to different collocations and contexts'. The NLS definition, by contrast, veers towards the prescriptive once more, claiming that the synonym '[a]voids over-use of any word; adds variety'. The implication is that, for any given word, there is an optimum 'level of use'. This is a curious and unconvincing notion. When teachers seek to demonstrate the synonymous properties of individual words to pupils without accounting for collocational context, inauthentic examples are likely to trip them up. This is partly because, as Lyons (1995 p.60-61) states, 'It is by now almost a truism that absolute synonymy is extremely rare ... in natural languages'. He goes on to illustrate this with the example of *big/large*, which function synonymously in 'They live in a big/large house', but are not equally appropriate in 'I will tell my big sister'. Teachers and pupils need to be aware that words which occur very frequently in the language are often selected in pairs or groups (Clear et al. 1996; Renouf and Sinclair 1991; Sinclair 1991), and so, again, a word-by-word model of the generation of texts, or even of sentences, just does not seem to fit the facts. This is why I see it as significant that the NLS contains no main entry for 'collocation' in its glossary, and it is also another reason why I am unconvinced that 'word', 'sentence' and 'text' are always the most helpful 'levels' for categorising language for study.

This paper, as I have said, is not intended to address by any means all of the controversial issues about best practice in teaching and learning literacy with which the NLS is concerned, but there is one other angle from which I think the issue of 'theories of language' implicit in the NLS needs to be considered.

There is in the English language a handful of shibboleths which generate a disproportionate amount of strong feeling among commentators dubbed 'the language mavens' (Pinker 1994): those who complain to the BBC or write to the newspapers, and journalists who see it as their duty to expose 'declining standards' of language use. These items include details of variations between standard and non standard varieties of English, changing fashions in matters of style and so on. They are mostly very fine distinctions (between *who* and *whom*, for example, or between the 'acceptability' of *I have done* and the 'incorrectness' of *I done*), and the use of one rather than the other rarely causes any misunderstanding. Yet they are traditionally things to which the schooling system has given considerable prominence.

A number of linguists have addressed this issue recently and have tried to explain why the things people believe about language are:



generally the wrong things. More likely than not we have acquired ideas and beliefs that do not have facts to back them. However, we often insist on handing these on to others in the firm conviction that we are thereby handing on wisdom and perhaps even safeguarding the very language itself.

Wardaugh (1999) p.viii

It is of course often as children in school that we become acquainted with the 'language myths' discussed in Wardaugh's book and in another recent collection edited by Bauer and Trudgill (1998). Several of the 'myths' included here address shibboleths, including, for example, the 'illogicality' of the double negative - a belief perpetuated in the NLS which I discussed above. Educationalists owe it to their pupils to recognise that 'our knowledge about language has been expanding at a phenomenal rate during the latter half of the twentieth century' (p.xv), and to remedy the situation identified by Milroy and Milroy, who claimed recently that '... current public approaches to matters of language teaching and assessment are informed by a theory of language use which has altered very little since Jonathan Swift's time' (Milroy and Milroy 1991 p.177).

There may well be in some aspects of the NLS an impetus to modernise approaches to teaching about language, yet I fear that, even if there is, it is likely to be severely constrained by the realities of the nature of classroom discourse. Firstly, any area of knowledge becomes modified when it is the focus of teaching and learning. It inevitably has to be simplified, which makes it of even greater importance that there is clarity in the NLS both about the basic body of linguistic knowledge which is going to be most useful to pupils, and about the principles by which it can best be made accessible to them. I do not believe that this clarity is to be found in the current version of the NLS. Secondly, when the learners are young children, obliged by law to attend school whether they wish to or not, the discourse of the classroom will be at least partly determined by the relations of authority in which the teacher is inevitably the guardian of order. Teachers have a responsibility to teach reading and writing, which includes the responsibility for pointing out learners' errors - obviously pupils need to be put right about their mistakes so as to become increasingly competent readers and writers. However, 'right' and 'wrong' can be understood in relation not only to the curriculum but also to pupils' behaviour.

Schools are obliged to differentiate between learners, to monitor, assess, record and report their achievements, and this context too conditions the kind of discursive exchanges in which teachers and pupils are likely to engage. In many sequences on the training videos, the teacher puts closed questions to pupils, and a 'right' answer is sought. Pupils are asked 'who can

tell me ...?', and the successful individual is commended for being among those who can demonstrate their possession of the requisite item of knowledge.

Compounding this tendency for interactions in classrooms to be characterised by demonstrations of what is 'right' as opposed to 'wrong', and the need for discipline and order, is the fact that language itself has long been used as a symbol of moral order, and teachers have long been associated with 'authority in language' (Milroy and Milroy 1991; see also Cameron 1995, Chapter 3).

Thus it becomes apparent that fairly trivial shibboleths, and minor variations seen as indicative of 'correctness', can easily become exaggerated for social and political, rather than linguistic or strictly educational reasons. With the best of intentions, teachers can all too easily become caught up in unfounded notions of 'correctness', and while many champions of the NLS value its inclusive, egalitarian potential, it may well be that the more prescriptive, socially differentiating instincts which have dogged education about language in England for centuries (Bauer and Trudgill 1998; Cameron and Bourne 1988; Cox 1995; Crowley 1989; Crowley 1991; Goodson and Medway 1990; Hayhoe and Parker 1994; Jones and West 1988; Milroy and Milroy 1991; Stubbs 1989) will prove more powerful than the optimists hope.

We see ... how difficult it is to change a minor feature in the language once that feature has become established in such a way that it can be used to distinguish among users of a language. If we know and observe the traditional rules for using apostrophes and circumflex accents, we can feel superior to those who lack this knowledge. We can accuse them of ignorance, even of laziness. We can use language to classify people and to assert some kind of superiority. That the particular linguistic point is inconsequential is of little concern; in fact, it is quite irrelevant.

Wardaugh (1999) p.102)

In other words, issues of descriptive linguistic accuracy are subordinated to matters of social control. By all means let primary school teachers strive to include all pupils in those who know the rules for the use of the apostrophe (Year 4 Term 2); but teachers involved in trying to delay the demise of certain uses of the apostrophe have the right to an informed understanding of what this enterprise involves, including a realistic understanding of the processes of linguistic change.



## CONCLUSION

The NLS side-steps explicit engagement with theories of language. It incorporates insights from work in contemporary linguistics in some places and ignores them in others. What - if anything - is the significance of this observation?

Students in initial teacher training have to become familiar with the NLS, while a failure to demonstrate confidence in basic grammatical knowledge results in their ineligibility for qualified teacher status (DfEE 1997). There is, as I know from experience, a serious dilemma for tutors whose students are confused by discrepancies in statements about language in the NLS and those in other sources, such as contemporary linguistics textbooks. This problem is compounded by similar items in the diagnostic tasks designed to test students' and teachers' 'subject knowledge' in English (Teacher Training Agency n.d.), and it raises some serious concerns about the versions of language which will be used in the additional forthcoming tests which teachers will be obliged to undertake (Baker 1999).

I think there are also some larger conclusions to be drawn. The first point to be made is encapsulated in Raymond Williams' often cited maxim: 'A definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world' (Williams 1988 p.3). Williams' *Keywords* is acknowledged by Carter in his own *Keywords in Language and Literacy*, in which he also alludes to Bakhtin, suggesting that his own book:

illustrates what Bakhtin (1981) calls the centripetal and centrifugal forces in language and society. Centripetal forces in language push towards a unitary language system and cultural and political centralisation. The centrifugal forces work against the centripetal forces and push towards variation, diversity and disunification.

Carter (1995) p.xi

On the one hand, the NLS is centralised, nationally imposed and highly prescriptive, an example of centripetal forces. It is not surprising, therefore, if there are aspects of its perspective on language which tend towards standardisation and unification. It deploys a transmissive pedagogy for its implementation: trainers are tightly constrained by the scripts produced for each session, which are timed to the minute. On the other hand, like all political initiatives of this sort, the NLS is the product of a range of interests and agendas, and this accounts in part both for its internal inconsistencies and for its more 'centrifugal' tendencies. This is one reason why its outcome is far from fully determined and predictable.

The second point is that it would be convenient for the strategy if language could be seen as neatly distributed within the metaphorical 'structure' imagined in the NLS Framework, a static edifice comprised of sounds, words and sentences. If texts were simply collections of sentences put together from these building blocks, and if meanings were inherent in words, the management of language for a curriculum might be a process rather like the construction of short, medium and long term planning grids. But the 'building-blocks' model fails to capture the power of language as meaning potential, a network of options (Halliday 1978). Or, as the philosopher Charles Taylor puts it:

Language is not an assemblage of separable instruments, which lie as it were transparently to hand, and which can be used to marshal ideas, this use being something we can fully control and oversee. Rather it is something in the nature of a web, and to complicate the image, is present as a whole in any one of its parts. To speak is to touch a bit of the web, and this is to make the whole resonate.

Taylor (1985) p.231

The insights associated with such descriptions need not lead us to despair of teaching young children about language on the grounds that it is all too complicated. Indeed it has been convincingly argued that, in the traditional grammar lessons of the 1950s and 1960s, it was teachers' attempts to impose an artificial uniformity on what are actually flexible systems which created problems for learners: a prescriptive approach to language which is driven to over-simplify can make learning about it more difficult. As Keith (1990 p.73) puts it: 'A sense of deficiency in language use ... engendered in so many school children, is in no small part due to a prevailing view of grammar as correctness, prescription and proscription'.

Thirdly, language is not statically sealed away in texts - it is ubiquitous in the social world. A functional theory of language takes account of social relations and the constitutive potential in them of language itself. It recognises that meanings are not given in texts, to be read off from them in entirely predictable ways, an idea which has been labelled the 'fallacy of internalism' (Thompson 1990 p.24). The creative engagement of language users with texts, in context, and with each other, is not simply about learning the skills of literacy. In places, the NLS specifies the need for pupils to learn to become reflective and critical readers. This recognition that readers are not passive recipients of texts is a corollary of the recognition that texts are not simply carriers of transparent messages. Once we acknowledge that the NLS materials are themselves texts, we are bound to recognise that the strategy cannot successfully prescribe a unitary,



homogeneous reading of the Framework, because pupils and practitioners will inevitably bring variation and diversity to their interactions with it. This diversity goes well beyond either the internal skills of literacy or the internal relations of the linguistic system.

To conclude: some of the ideas represented in the NLS clearly offer exciting potential for the development of children's understanding of language. I reserve judgement on what the outcome of the implementation of the NLS as a whole will be because this is a socio-political matter, and, as I have said, cannot be fully predictable. The main purpose of this paper, however, has been to explain my dismay about a lost opportunity in the NLS. It could have represented a linguistically informed, integrated and theoretically coherent conceptualisation of language. In their current form, the texts which comprise it fail to do this.

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